

THE NEW 'NEW NEGRO'

The Negro Revolt, by Louis E. Lomax, Harper. 271 pp. \$4.50.

The New Negro, ed. by Mathew H. Ahmann, Fides. 145 pp. \$3.50.

Black Nationalism, by E. U. Essien-Udon, Chicago. 367 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Morroe Berger, Professor of Sociology, Princeton University;
author, The Arab World Today

Is there a "new Negro" or isn't there? The answer seems to be that there is, if you look at sit-ins, freedom rides, the activity of college students, and the flourishing of new organizations. But then, of course, these techniques, movements and moods all have their sources and precedents, so maybe there is no "new Negro." Actually, both answers are right: There is a "new Negro" now, but there have been previous ones as well -- there is a "new Negro" every 10 or 20 years, in fact, because new goals are set in the same old aspiration to be treated as human beings.

Today there is a sense of urgency about the position of Negroes, just as there was during and immediately after World War II. That period demanded the end of the legal structure supporting inequality, segregation and exploitation. Even as we fumble about trying to adjust to the previous demand, a new one overtakes us: the end of the practices whose legal props have been kicked out or denied. The closer the Negro comes to equality, the more impatient he naturally is with the inequalities that remain. So we are constantly in arrears of the Negro vanguard. Whites are slow to understand the urgency of the demands and the character of the mood, Negroes slow to move to the positions already won.

These three books cover all aspects of Negro demands today. The broadest one is Louis E. Lomax's. He dates the beginning of "the Negro revolt" in 1957, and summarizes its principal features as 1) the insistence upon the end of segregation and the use of new methods to hasten it; and 2) dissatisfaction with the "old" leadership of the NAACP. The main reason for the revolt, he says, is the Negro's loss of faith in the "white power structure" and in the traditional, "legislative" means of improving his position.

After a breezy "Negro view of American history," Lomax goes about his task of describing the many-sided revolt. He discusses sit-ins, freedom rides, the challenge that new leaders and organizations pose to the traditional ones, the Black Muslims, the white liberal's relation to the Negro's struggle, and the reaction of the Negro college, press, politicians and churches to recent events. Finally, he describes the rejuvenation of the Urban League as an example of the proper approach to Negro social problems, the attitude of recent administrations in Washington toward Negro rights, the current campaign to protect the right to vote and to get people to use it, and the international significance of the Negro's battle for equality.

The Negro Revolt is a reliable and readable guide to its subject, but, covering the whole panorama, it does not go deeply into anything. It is good journalism but one gets the impression it tries to do something more.

Lomax writes not only as a reporter but as a participant, yet his own role in the events he describes has not been intrinsically interesting or significant except, perhaps, in what it has meant to him. He tries sometimes to write with feeling and imagination about the dramatic aspects of his theme, but with less success than when he is doing a straight job of reporting.

The two other books deal with almost opposite poles of the Negro community. The New Negro, composed of papers prepared for a symposium conducted by the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice and the transcript of a radio discussion on "The Negro in American Culture," touches mainly the ideas and activities of the educated people involved in the sit-ins and freedom rides, and the intellectual life. Black Nationalism, by E. U. Essien-Udim, a Nigerian educated in this country and now teaching at Harvard University, is an intensive, well-written and perceptive study of the Black Muslims, who get their followers largely from among the less educated.

There are interesting and important differences and similarities between these two kinds of groups. Both speak in religious terms, but the middle-class followers of Martin Luther King and the Congress of Racial Equality do so in Christian terms while the Muslims reject Christianity in favor of an "African" religion that they (mistakenly) regard as unconnected with the enslavement of black men. Both speak of love, the Christians for the oppressor and the Muslims, as they put it, for "self before others." The Christians express concern mainly with the violence between Negroes and whites, but the Muslims are concerned largely with ending the violence Negroes do to each other.

Dr. Essien-Udim's book is particularly welcome because it helps us understand a movement for which there is little sympathy. Most accounts of the Black Muslims arouse derision or fear without enabling us to understand them. Black Nationalism is at once sympathetic and objective. The author shows us that though the Muslims attract Negroes of lower socio-economic position, the movement's goal is to convert them to energetic, self-reliant, middle-class respectability. As for violence, he insists that the Muslims will not turn to it except in self-defense. If we persist in misunderstanding their intentions, we shall drive them to exactly the kind of action we most dread as dangerous for everyone.

Dr. Essien-Udim views the Muslims as a depressed group seeking an "identity" in a society that makes it a shame to be what they are and cannot escape. Their response to exclusion is to say they do not care to be included; they reject those who reject them.

This attitude on the part of the most depressed Negroes attracted to the Muslims is in fact rather like the attitude expressed by some of the most sophisticated of the Negro intellectuals. In a radio discussion transcribed in The New Negro, James Baldwin says: "...I'm living in this society and I've had a good look at it--what makes you think I want to be accepted?" And Lorraine Hansberry asks: "...is it necessary to integrate oneself into a burning house?"

The two poles of Negro life have another thing in common. Malcolm X, the New York leader of the Black Muslims, is fond of pointing out that though whites do not know the depth of the black man's disillusion and bitterness, the black man understands the white man rather well from having been his servant and he

knows the white man is not all that superior. And here is Miss Hansberry again: "We've been washing everybody's underwear for 300 years. We know when you're not clean."

Finally, these two different classes of Negroes have in common a growing capacity for self-mastery and self-control. The freedom riders and the sit-inners display it under extraordinary conditions, and the Muslims combine provocative rhetoric with excellent discipline.

This similarity between apparently different moods, social movements, and explicit ideologies is the true measure of the "Negro revolt" and the "new Negro." Revolt and newness pervade all the articulate and sensitive individuals and groups, including those attacked as "traditional" and outdated. All three books point the way for us to understand this profound development in the Negro community.

/ Reprinted from The New Leader, Vol. 45, No. 23 (November 12, 1962), pp. 25-26. /